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Even at 74, UM scientist G.W. Prescott finds work too interesting for eight-hour day or retirement

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UM news

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EVEN AT 74, UM SCIENTIST G. W. PRESCOTT FINDS WORK
TOO INTERESTING FOR EIGHT-HOUR DAY OR RETIREMENT

By Dennis Sale
UM Information Services

MISSOULA, Mont.--

While many people may dream of shorter workdays, Dr. Gerald W. Prescott, who is nearing a spry 75, continues to put in 14 to 17 hours a day at the work he loves best, the study of lower aquatic plants known as algae (pronounced algee).

Prescott, who is a professor of botany at the University of Montana in Missoula and resident biologist at the UM Biological Station at Yellow Bay on Flathead Lake in northwestern Montana, said he has never tied himself down "to an eight-hour workday because I never feel my day should end until my work is finished, and that is often at 10 or 11 o'clock at night."

Does he ever consider retiring from the University of Montana faculty? "Oh, yes, the idea appeals to me, but I hate the thoughts of retiring from the University without first completing the projects I have started," Prescott replied. "Besides, I don't feel any different now than when I was 60 or even 50. And sometimes I feel like I'm 19."

In an interview at the Yellow Bay facility on the east shore of the 27-mile-long lake, Montana's largest, Prescott, who looks more like 60 than 74, said, "I never find working with algae tedious at all, to say the least.

"Algae such as desmids are very important in the food chain of fish. Little algae feed small animals and the little animals feed fish," Prescott said. "And those who are concerned with the productivity of a lake, including the number of fish and other aquatic life, realize that productivity is reflected in the lake's ability to produce food, of course."

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It is the great number and variety of algae that has interested Prescott since he was an undergraduate student at the University of Oregon in Eugene in the early 1920s.

"Algae have many aspects," he said. "They are attractive just to look at, and they fascinate many people because they are so interesting and ornate."

Like weeds or corn, algae are sensitive to various nutrients, Prescott said. He said water must be well supplied with such nutrients as nitrogen and phosphorus in order to produce great quantities of either beneficial algae such as diatoms, or detrimental algae known as "blue-greens."

"Plankton, blue-green algae, produce toxins or poisons that are more potent than arsenic," the scientist said. "A number of laboratory animals have been killed within five minutes after they have been innoculated with plankton toxins. Toxins produced by plankton also have killed many animals in Iowa, South Dakota and southern Canada after the animals consumed polluted water.

"We have studied cases of animal deaths and the pattern forms a belt across the top of the northern states and southern Canada," Prescott said. "Animal deaths are peculiar to areas where there is hard water and water well supplied with nitrogen and phosphorous. Also, some human allergies and skin irritations have been pinned on algae. Water containing significant amounts of algae dries on skin and can produce rashes."

Prescott said that on Flathead Lake there is one very troublesome species of blue-green algae that flourishes during August in Yellow Bay and other shallow bays on the lake.

"We find 'Annie,' the generic name for Anabaena and one of the most troublesome algae, very frequently on Flathead Lake," Prescott said. "And there also are two other plankton--'Mike' (Microcystis) and 'Fannie' (Aphanizomenon)--which, along with 'Annie,' produce greater amounts of toxins than perhaps any of the other algae. They spoil water for drinking purposes and lead directly to the death of fish because of the poisonous by-products they produce during decomposition."

Prescott, who was born in La Porte City, Iowa, Sept. 25, 1899, said water contaminated by algae often must be treated with algicides such as copper sulphate to make it safe to drink. Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minn., and New York City are among the cities which must put special chemicals in water to make it safe to drink, he said.

Prescott received his bachelor of arts degree in botany at the University of Oregon in 1924, and the master of arts degree and doctor of philosophy degree in botany at the University of Iowa, Iowa City, in 1926 and 1928, respectively. He was on the faculty at Albion College, Albion, Mich., from 1929-46, and served as a botany professor at Michigan State University, East Lansing, from 1946 until his retirement in 1968.

Following his retirement from Michigan State in 1968, Prescott joined the Montana faculty when the UM facility at Yellow Bay began year-round operations. Before becoming a full-time UM faculty member, he had conducted scientific research and taught 15 summers between 1950-68 at Yellow Bay. He did summer research at the University of Michigan Biological Station at Douglas Lake from 1940-49.

Prescott has conducted a number of scientific studies on algae in northern Alaska, Mexico and the Panama Canal Zone. Also, during World War II he was one of a limited number of botanists sent to Ecuador by the U.S. Foreign Economic Administration to search for Chincona trees, which supply the drug quinine for treatment of patients with malaria.

Besides continuing with studies of algae from Alaska and Ecuador, Prescott is conducting studies of water and streams in Ecuador. He also is working on part three of a book entitled "A Synopsis of North American Desmids" in collaboration with Dr. William C. Vinyard, a professor of botany at California State University, Humboldt, Arcada, who works summers at the Biological Station at Yellow Bay, and Dr. Hannah Croasdale of Dartmouth College, Hanover, N.H.

Prescott has held major offices in the American Microscopical Society, and he became a member of Phi Beta Kappa, national honorary scholastic society, while at Michigan State University. He was enrolled into Sigma Xi, national science honorary, at the University of Iowa.

Besides being author or coauthor of five books, Prescott also has written more than 80 scientific articles for publication in various journals and periodicals.

Prescott received the prestigious Certificate of Merit from the Botanical Society of America this summer at a meeting of the American Institute of Biological Sciences in Tempe, Ariz., in recognition as an "influential teacher and knowledgeable student of the taxonomy, ecology and geography of freshwater algae, especially desmids, of North America; proponent of the importance of algae in limnology; prime mover in the founding of the Phycological Society of America."

The Montana scientist makes his home at the UM Biological Station at Yellow Bay with his wife, Terressa Cox Prescott, who is from Ontario, Ore.

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